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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, New York, to assess the need for and define the objectives of an expanded orientation program, to determine the components of such a program and how these components would be integrated with other student development services, and to propose and design a program for future implementation. Data for the study were collected through 40 interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators from 27 departments; an off-campus orientation workshop involving 26 student affairs professionals; a survey of 1,025 MCC students; a pilot orientation program presented to 324 high school seniors; an evening orientation program for "2 + 2" transfer students and their parents; a review of the literature on orientation; and an analysis of programs at other institutions. The study found support for expansion of the college's orientation program among faculty and staff, a lack of awareness among many current students of existing orientation options, and support for the existing peer counseling program. Based on study findings, an orientation plan was developed which underscores institutional commitment to the program, outlines goals and objectives, proposes a design for orientation sessions and an orientation course, and considers organizational, staffing, and funding considerations. (AACZ)

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OPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES:

A Study of Orientation for Monroe Community College

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August 1988

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East High School
Fairport High School
Greece Athena High School
Honeoye Falls High School
Rush-Henrietta High School
Webster High School

Survey Respondents

State University of New York Community Colleges

Adirondack Community College
Broome Community College
Cayuga Community College
Clinton Community College
Community College of the Finger Lakes
Dutchess Community College
Fulton-Montgomery Community College
Genesee Community College
Jefferson Community College
Laguardia Community College
Mohawk Valley Community College
Nassau Community College
Orange County Community College
Sullivan County Community College
Westchester Community College

Member Colleges, League for Innovation

Cuyahoga Community College
Dallas County Community College District
Delta College
Foothill College
Humber College
Johnson County Community College
Lane Community College
Miami-Dade Community College
Moraine Valley Community College
St. Louis Community College

Member Colleges, National Orientation Association

Berkshire Community College
Broward Community College
Dundalk Community College
Miami-Dade Community College
Montgomery County Community College
Norwalk Community College
Rochester Institute of Technology
SUNY College at Brockport
SUNY College at Cortland

Other Colleges

Concordia College
De Anza College
Drexel University
Maryville College
Nazareth College
Penn State College
South Mountain Community College

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ABSTRACT

The role of orientation is examined in terms of educational responsibility, student success, and retention. Primary research specific to Monroe Community College, as well as secondary research, is synthesized, resulting in a series of recommendations for the College.

Purpose of the Study

For the past two and a half decades, Monroe Community College (MCC) has been committed to providing quality support services which are integral to the success of entering students. While substantial efforts have been devoted to the present orientation program, national trends, changing institutional conditions, and student demographics suggest a re-examination of the specific function of orientation at the College. The objectives of this study were threefold:

1. To identify the needs and clearly define the objectives of an orientation program
2. To determine the various structural components intrinsic in such a program and how those components are integrated with other student development services
3. To design a proposed program for future implementation

Sources of Information

The objectives of the study dictated that both primary and secondary research be conducted to provide an extensive cross-section of information. Primary data was collected from:

- forty interviews of the faculty, staff, and administration, representing 27 departments within MCC.
- an off-campus orientation workshop involving 26 members of the Student Affairs professional staff.
- a survey administered to 1,025 MCC students.
- a pilot orientation program, presented to 324 seniors from seven Rochester area high schools.
- an evening orientation session for "2 Plus 2" transfer students attended by over two hundred students and parents.
- participation in the "Freshman Year Experience" conference sponsored by the University of South Carolina.

Secondary research was drawn from various resources including, but not limited to: numerous publications by recognized authorities in the field of orientation and retention; professional organizations such the American College Testing Program, the Council for the Advancement of Standards, and the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. In addition, 95 two and four year institutions throughout the country were contacted, including member colleges of the League for Innovation and the National Orientation Directors Association.

Limitations of the Study

1. Definition of Orientation

The contextural nature of the term *orientation* precludes a universal definition. One institution, for example, may consider advisement or registration as elements of orientation, while another institution may define orientation as a one day social activity. The National Orientation Directors Association recognizes the Upcraft and Farnsworth (1984) definition: *"Orientation is any effort on the part of the institution to help entering students make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and to enhance their success in college."* For the purpose of clarity, this report will subscribe to that definititon.

2. Measurements

The emphasis on orientation as it relates to student success is a relatively new concept, as is evaluation data regarding effectiveness. While an increasing number of colleges have such programs, published longitudinal statistics are limited.

3. Present Orientation/Advisement/ Registration Program

The present configuration of the Orientation/Advisement/ Registration program at Monroe Community College was an additional limitation of the study. The absence of findings and recommendations regarding the advisement/registration components in no way implies a disregard or ignorance of these processes, but rather implies a commitment to limit the study to one area: orientation.

Primary Research

INTERVIEWS

The purpose of the faculty, staff and administration interviews was to conduct personal consultations with various personnel from MCC, in order to identify the direction of the orientation program. Forty people from twenty-seven departments were interviewed. The meetings focused upon the following topics:

- What are the strengths of the present program?
- What needs should an orientation program address?
- If an orientation program is a process, what should the process look like?
- Based upon the process described, what are some obstacles which would need to be overcome in order to implement that process?
- What specific institutional benefits can the college derive from a comprehensive orientation program?

Many ideas were generated with a number of common themes recurring throughout the interviews. The major concepts that appeared in these exchanges follow.

Strengths of the Present Program

Without a doubt, the peer counseling component of the orientation program garnered the largest response. Many were impressed with the caliber, as well as the knowledge, of the student counselors. Others spoke emphatically about the excellent job the Counseling Center does, given the lack of resources.

The staff was viewed as another strength. An exceptionally high number of respondents spoke in admiration of the staff, citing them as caring people with positive attitudes who were capable and enthusiastic. *"Team caring"* was an appropriate term coined by one interviewee. Many felt that the staff was a good foundation for the program.

The fact that the present program is fast and cheap was considered by many as both an asset and a deficit. A large volume of information is presented in a short period of time at relatively minimal cost. Conversely, there were questions about whether the students were being adequately served. One person offered the following analogy: *"Our orientation is a fast food approach. Unfortunately, it doesn't satiate the hunger."* While some viewed the low cost as favorable, many felt it showed a lack of institutional commitment.

The overwhelming majority of people felt the most important element of an orientation program should be socialization; they felt there was a need for events which involve students, faculty and staff — with the emphasis on fun. One respondent said, *"What we do is not fun."* Almost everyone spoke about socialization reducing anxiety levels and fostering a sense of affiliation. They felt an orientation program should help students feel connected, and, as a result, students may be more receptive to accepting information. Furthermore, respondents felt that socialization would encourage a quicker

adjustment during an anxiety producing transitionary period.

It was felt the dissemination of information was the second most important element an orientation program should address. Interviewees cited the need to inform students of the resources available at the college (i.e. Health Services, Financial Aid, and Student Activities). Many respondents did not mention academic information as a critical element of orientation.

The final need cited was one of preparing students for the college experience. Many felt orientation should speak to the realities of college life, stressing the commitment involved. The students' expectations of college and the college's expectations of students should be emphasized. A large number felt there was a need for specific programs to encourage student success, with study skills being most frequently named. A program should include components of time management, note taking, mnemonic devices and so forth.

Once again, other needs were voiced; however, socialization, information, and preparation were most frequently mentioned.

The Process of Orientation

First, eighty-one percent of the respondents felt the orientation program should be expanded in length. They felt that under the current system, students suffer from information overload. Suggestions varied for lengthening the time frame of the program from a weekend, to a sustained, sequential program, continuous in nature. One person stated, *"Orientation is an ongoing process, not just a September 5th deal."*

Second, people felt very strongly about adding depth to the program. A clear majority thought that orientation should be separate from advisement and registration. Many further suggested an orientation office with specifically assigned responsibilities and personnel.

Next, numerous interviewees felt that student involvement should be proactive, rather than reactive, and referred back to the need to include socialization elements in the program. Many used the same quote, *"We've got to get the students involved."*

Some people, emphasizing the changing demographics of MCC students, felt that orientation should address the needs of specific subgroups. *"A generic program won't fit,"* is how one person put it. Examples of eighteen-year-old students differing from returning women students or adult learners were often mentioned.

A large number of those interviewed suggested that orientation should be a course offering. They were, however, divided on whether it be mandatory or optional, credit or non-credit. They went on to say that the foundation of the course should be of the College Survival or Study Skills genre, given that the ultimate goal of an orientation program should be student success. One person used the analogy, *"We need to teach wilderness tactics."*

Finally, many interviewees stated that faculty involvement should be a

crucial element of the program. Others liked the idea of faculty advisors, but suggested they be carefully selected and trained, in addition to being paid.

Obstacles to the Process

For as many suggestions which were generated about what the process should look like, there were an equal number of reasons offered about why those ideas would not work. These barriers can be categorized into three areas: resources, responsibility, and reluctance.

The resource category was cited most frequently as the reason there would be difficulty implementing new ideas. Specifically, there was a perception that money, staff, and time were not available. Even more specifically, many voiced concern that the administration fears losing Full Time Equivalencies (FTEs) and was unwilling to commit resources to an orientation program. Again, many felt restructuring would be difficult, given the current methodology.

Many of those interviewed felt there was a political issue of finding a "home" for an orientation program. They thought the administration should assign responsibility, since there is a perception of an increased work load. A majority of the respondents wanted leadership with a clear understanding of what comprises an orientation program. They felt that an effective program would require a college wide commitment and spoke of the need to establish a valued program with unqualified support from the administration.

The third obstacle included a category of reluctance: students would be reluctant to participate; faculty would be reluctant to expand the program; people are reluctant to accept new responsibilities without some compensation. Additionally, interviewees cited a defensiveness of the present system.

More than one person compared the present program with the dark ages, while others referred to it as a "1960's system." Most of the respondents felt the program was dated and change was needed, yet, obstacles existed.

Institutional Benefits

When asked to list institutional benefits, the largest number of people spoke of improved retention. Many felt there was a corollary between a knowledgeable, contented, student population and FTEs. They also felt the image of the college would be enhanced, which in turn, would have a direct bearing on community support, alumni funding and recruitment. Many further stated that a comprehensive program would be more efficient and felt a successful restructuring of this program may prompt similar scrutiny of opportunities in other departments.

Altogether, the interview element of the study achieved the following objectives:

- It increased the awareness of the complexities of the orientation process.
- It provided a heterogeneous

dimension to the information gathering process.

- It afforded interviewees a forum to express their thoughts about the program.
- It helped identify potential options and opportunities, as well as obstacles, that must be addressed in developing a comprehensive program.

STUDENT AFFAIRS WORKSHOP

On March 8, 1988, twenty-six members of the Student Affairs staff participated in a workshop which focused on identifying, discussing and analyzing the various components of a comprehensive orientation program.

The group was informed of the ongoing research and the results of the faculty, staff, and administrative interviews. The session reported the findings, which included the strengths of the present program, while identifying student needs. The issue of the process of orientation, and the obstacles existent in that process, was also addressed.

Participants were asked to identify various characteristics of MCC students; the consensus was that the student population is very diverse. Citing differences in cultural, economic, and academic background, in addition to differences in age, goals, interests, responsibilities and commitments, the group emphasized the importance of structuring a program based upon divergent characteristics. The group felt that even though there is a diversity of subgroups, an orientation program should include some elements common to all of them.

Respondents spoke of the need for opportunities for students to socialize with their peers, the staff, and the administration, suggesting a correlation between socialization and affiliation. Many said a favorable first impression must be created by the college and reinforced throughout the student's experience at MCC.

Much concern was voiced over the need to develop student survival skills as a preparation for the college experience. Preparation should include teaching study skills, as well as teaching students how to become *"system wise."* Identification of services and resources was of primary importance, yet the group felt it was crucial that the information be appropriately sequenced over an extended period of time.

Goals of an Orientation Program

Participants were in accord that the goal of orientation was to assist students in their transition to the college environment, thereby enhancing their opportunities for success. In assisting these students, it was agreed that the objectives of orientation should be relevancy, adjustment, responsibility, affiliation, preparation, and persistence. However, the need to further clarify the term of relevancy became apparent, since it may differ depending upon individual definitions of student success.

Benefits of a Comprehensive Orientation Program

When asked to list benefits of a comprehensive orientation program, participants categorized them into two areas: institutional benefits and student benefits.

Institutional benefits included: increased retention; an enhanced image in the community; a cooperative spirit among faculty, staff, and administration; and finally an increased efficiency.

Facilitating self-directedness, promoting a sense of affiliation, reducing anxiety levels, and fostering individual student success were elements identified under student benefits.

Critical Elements of an Orientation Program

The following components were named as critical elements in a successful program:

- college wide support
- sustained, coordinated effort
- responsibility and resources assigned by administration
- centralized office
- faculty involvement
- flexibility based upon diverse student needs
- modular and continuous in structure
- student appeal, acceptance, and value
- faculty and staff training
- fun as well as informative
- evaluation components
- separate from advisement and registration

Creating an Ideal Program

Given the characteristics, goals, benefits, and critical elements, participants were asked to design an ideal orientation program. Group facilitators reported high levels of group frustration. There were basic philosophical differences among group members; consequently, an ideal program could not be constructed. Some offered numerous suggestions, while others concentrated on why ideas would not work. Attitudinal obstacles, as well as logistical obstacles, existed.

In conclusion, three objectives were achieved in the workshop:

- Many worthwhile ideas were generated.
- There was an expanded awareness of the complexities of the orientation process and increased sensitivity toward change.
- Potential opportunities and obstacles inherent in the project were identified.

HIGH SCHOOL PILOT PROGRAM

Previous research indicated that an orientation program should be designed to accommodate the needs of various subgroups of entering freshmen (i.e. high school students, part-time students, and returning adults). Since high school seniors who had applied to MCC for the Fall of 1988 formed the largest identifiable constituency, a pilot program was designed specifically for this group. The goal of the program was to assist students in their transition to the college environment. There were four objectives:

1. to prepare students for the

registration process
2. to reduce anxiety levels inherent in the transition from high school to college
3. to provide an opportunity for questions and answers
4. to promote a sense of affiliation with MCC

Participants

Seven Rochester area schools were involved in the pilot program. Participants included Bishop Kearney; East; Fairport; Greece-Athena; Honeoye Falls-Lima; Rush-Henrietta; and Webster High Schools. In all, three hundred and twenty-four seniors from urban, suburban, rural, and parochial schools attended the program.

Elements of the Program

Based upon prior interviews with a counselor from each high school, it was determined that there was a common core of knowledge that entering freshmen required. Categorized into service and academic information, students learned about the process of registration and on campus services, as well as co-curricular opportunities. The program concluded with a discussion of the differences between high school and college, followed by a question and answer session.

Length of the program varied from forty to ninety minutes, depending upon the specific needs of each high school. At Greece-Athena, for example, three programs of forty-five minutes were presented, while Fairport preferred one session of ninety minutes. Rush-Henrietta, however, chose the option of a half-day field trip, busing students to MCC for an on-site orientation.

Observations

Although it is difficult to measure the long term effectiveness of the pilot program, students and counselors alike offered many positive comments about the benefits of the project.

The on campus visit by Rush-Henrietta students was clearly the most successful of the programs. Students enjoyed the experience of learning about the college, at the college, and were more receptive to processing information. Student comments supported the objective of fostering a sense of affiliation toward the college.

The program was easily adaptable to meet the needs of specific groups. Students at East High School, as an example, posed many questions about financial aid, while Fairport students were more concerned about course requirements.

The pilot program supported the idea that as college educators, we assume a knowledge base which may not exist. As an illustration, some students did not know that textbooks were not provided by the college, and others had no idea that a semester was fifteen weeks long. Many did not know what a credit hour was or that they did not have to attend college all day, every day.

Designing the pilot program was time consuming, as was the implementation. Once it was in place, however, it required little maintenance other than restructuring the emphasis of the

different elements.

In conclusion, without a longitudinal study, based upon measurable outcomes, it is difficult to assess the success of the high school program. While the students enjoyed the sessions and looked favorably upon them, it may be more cost effective to incorporate the program as a subset of a larger on campus orientation program.

STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS

In an effort to determine how students felt about orientation, a survey was administered to 1025 students, representing a cross section of the MCC population. Respondents were almost equally distributed among the Liberal Arts, Business, and Career Programs.

When asked to assess the Orientation program, 105 students felt it was well done, 375 described it as satisfactory, and 64 thought it was poorly done. Of the respondents, 176 indicated that they did not know there was a program. Further, 132 students said they did not attend Orientation.

Approximately six hundred students said that they would have been willing to attend a one-day orientation program at the time they entered MCC. Almost seventy percent of the respondents indicated that some sort of college survival course would have been helpful. They expressed interest in study skills, career information, time management, test-taking techniques, transfer options, and college resources.

Twenty-one percent of the students wrote personal comments. They expressed concern about the large number of people being processed, lack of faculty involvement, and the difficulty in learning how to interpret the master schedule. Many students suggested that orientation should be separate from advisement and registration with an emphasis placed upon socialization events. Personal comments also included suggestions that orientation should be offered to specific sub-groups (i.e. part time students, athletes, returning adults, and transfer students) and be available at varying times.

Themes in the student survey closely paralleled the faculty/ administration interviews with one exception: interviewees felt that students would be reluctant to participate in an Orientation program; however, the results of the student survey indicate that students are requesting a program.

" 2 Plus 2" ORIENTATION PROGRAM

On May 18, 1988, a " 2 Plus 2" Cooperative Degree Program orientation was presented to more than two hundred students and their families. Rapid growth of program options dictated that students be better informed of the characteristics of the Cooperative Degree agreements prior to advisement and registration. In addition to socializing with others in their specific program, students had the opportunity to:

- receive registration and advisement information.
- learn more about the advantages of the program.

- obtain information about required courses and grade point averages.
- identify other transfer options.

Program Elements

The planning process involved cooperation among the Admissions, Counseling, and Transfer/Placement staff from the inception of the program through the implementation. One objective of the program was to provide information in a systematic manner. In addition, the amount of data presented was intentionally limited in scope, to protect against information overload. Topics included academic matters as well as alternative transfer options and a discussion of how college differed from high school. Ending with an informal question and answer session, the orientation was completed in seventy-five minutes.

Observations

Based upon the attentiveness and frequent questions by the audience, the presentation was well received by the participants. After the program, positive comments reconfirmed this observation. Furthermore, the response of students and parents not only reinforced the program objectives, but also generated new insights among the staff for future programs of this nature.

The results underscored the advantages of designing a program for specific sub-groups. It also reinforced the importance of presenting information in a sequential "need to know" basis.

While the orientation session reaffirmed some student's initial program selection, it prompted others to change their original choice. Through preventative intervention, eleven students were placed in the correct program before the semester started.

Finally, the cooperation among the departments involved demonstrated that a program can be successful if there is a coordinated effort in inception, organization, support, and execution.

Review of the Literature

As early as the 1890's, colleges recognized the need for providing a special orientation program for new students. Since then, sweeping societal changes have forced colleges to reexamine the role orientation plays in the mission of their individual institutions. A 1988 report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges suggests that now, *"more than any other time in their history, community colleges must define with greater clarity and sophistication, their distinctive mission."* As a result of that clarification, there has been a growing interest in designing orientation programs that increase the likelihood of student success. Traditional programs have given way to new dynamic endeavors with concomitant themes of retention vis-a-vis student success and responsibility for student education.

► Educational theorist, Vincent Tinto, has conducted extensive studies in the area of student retention. Tinto contends that successful programs are based upon the institution's underlying commitment to students, rather than a commitment to retention (1987). Further, Tinto describes six principles of institutional action which should govern that commitment:

1. Institutions should ensure that new students enter with or have the opportunity to acquire the skills needed for academic success.
2. Institutions should reach out to make personal contact with students beyond the formal domains of academic life.
3. Institutional retention actions should be systematic in character.
4. Institutions should start as early as possible to retain students.
5. The primary commitment of institutions should be to their students.
6. Education, not retention, should be the goal of institutional retention programs.

Tinto contends that student aspiration, motivation, persistence and retention are interrelated (Allen, 1986). Although Tinto's model has come under some criticism because it is based upon the needs of four year institutions, rather than community colleges, proponents would say that the basic premise of the model, an emphasis on institutional commitment to student success, rather than ledger sheets, is valid.

Tinto further emphasizes that institutions can enhance student success by treating student needs or problems as early as possible, approaching them in an integrated fashion. One such approach is a course offering which is flexible enough to adapt to individualized student needs. *"If we have learned anything over the years in our attempts to improve retention, it is the earlier one attends to a problem, the easier it is to deal with and the less likely it is that the problem will manifest itself in the form of student withdrawal."* This philosophy also coincides with the National Orientation Directors Association (1986) which states, *"The preventive*

work at orientation is the first step in effective retention."

► Similar to Tinto, Lee Noel, et al. (1987) agree that educational responsibility, rather than retention, should be the institutional goal. Suggesting that retention is the result or by-product of improved program and services, Noel states that the greatest benefit of an orientation program *"is its lifelong learning enrichment through establishing a positive attitude toward learning of any kind...no day-long or week-long program can achieve anything close in long-term effect."* With an expanded orientation emphasis continuing throughout the entire college experience, orientation will become *"only an early facet of retention."*

Recognizing that fifty percent of those students who drop out of college during (not between) the terms of the freshman year, do so in the first six weeks, Noel asserts that we can no longer rely solely on old approaches towards orientation. Therefore, orientation should be conducted over a protracted period of time, taking into account the natural developmental needs of students. Programs are needed which are aimed at improving the study skills and habits of students.

According to Noel, significant contact with faculty members and staff is critical in the initial stages of college enrollment. *"We need staff that can woo students, who get turned on instead of turned off when a student comes for assistance."* Expanding on the idea that correct staffing is the central element in student retention, it is necessary that the staff come into contact with students at the right time. Noel suggests a "front loading" strategy: relocating the right staff and resources to better serve entering students.

In short, Noel states that we are no longer dealing with traditional college students; as a result, we need to redesign traditional orientation programs. Programs should be based upon an educational philosophy which emphasizes student success, rather than retention.

Effective programs incorporate orientation courses which help students recognize the value of life-long learning, teaching them how to become successful learners in the process. The course should address issues of academic boredom, transition problems, and unrealistic expectations of college. Finally, a front-loading strategy of placing resources and enthusiastic staff in areas of high student contact emphasizes the institution's commitment to student success and educational responsibility.

► M. Lee Upcraft (1984) also feels that institutions have an obligation to help entering students maximize their chances for succeeding in college, agreeing that there is increasing evidence that orientation programs help retain students. Upcraft feels that a successful program should be designed within the framework based upon student's background/characteristics and how students develop. Without this framework, *"Orientation becomes a potpourri of unrelated and ineffective activities*

that will have little influence on the lives of entering students."

Expanding on this philosophy, Upcraft recommends the goals of an orientation program should incorporate means of aiding students with academic and personal adjustments as well as to assist families in understanding the experience. Orientation should also help the institution learn more about its entering students.

Translating those goals into a program, he lists the following objectives:

Orientation must:

- be a sustained and coordinated effort starting at the time of admission and continuing through the first year of enrollment.
- have the support of the entire campus community.
- be based on sound concepts of student development.
- use a variety of interventions.
- be appropriately timed and sequenced based upon student's readiness to receive information.
- be evaluated for effectiveness.
- be coordinated by a central office or person.

Like Noel, Upcraft offers the specific suggestion that institutions initiate an orientation course as a means of helping students become successful, which, in turn, may create a more positive attitude about learning as a process. He also feels that orientation should be based within development theories and proposes that students will participate in programs if those programs are consistent with their needs. He also maintains that a successful program needs to direct itself towards the family, as well as the student. Families are an integral part of the college experience; consequently, families need to understand potential adjustments issues.

To continue, Upcraft speaks of the need for an extended orientation program which relates to both societal and individual factors. If an institution can address itself to these issues, an orientation program would provide maximum opportunities for student achievement.

► In 1982, Aubrey Forest conducted a study sponsored by the American College Testing group, which dealt with the topic of student persistence at forty-four public and private colleges and universities. Recommending six strategies for student success, the report reiterates the importance of an on-going orientation course for students. *"Probably the single most important move an institution can make to increase student persistence to graduation is to ensure that students receive the guidance they need at the beginning of the journey through college to graduation."*

► John Gardner (1988), citing the basic training concepts of Fortune 500 companies and the United States Army, agrees that proper orientation is the key to success. He states that *"American higher education essentially is a social system undergoing enormous stress and strain."* He feels that it is unrealistic for institutions to put students into an entirely new sub-

culture without helping the student learn to successfully adapt to that new environment.

Agreeing with the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (1988), Gardner believes that every college should develop a comprehensive First Year Program with orientation. Gardner suggests that frequently colleges are *"simply letting the freshman experience happen by serendipity."* Calling for orientation reform, he contends that orientation is a profession which is acquiring dignity, status, and a reputation in and of its own right; it should involve a deliberate effort to make good things happen for freshmen by design, not by accident. Furthermore, it should be a continuing process, extended through the student's first semester or quarter and every student should have the choice of taking it. Gardner has developed an international reputation for his model *"University 101"* course which will be examined later.

- The Council for the Advancement of Standards (1985) also recognizes the importance of orientation and lists eighteen goals which should be applicable, regardless of the size or purpose of the institution. These goals include commitments to aid new students in their transition to the institution, while exposing them to broad educational opportunities and integrating students into the life of the institution.

- The National Orientation Directors Association (1986), speaks to specifics, suggesting that there is a need for an orientation office which can provide on-going services and programs to students. This office would act as laison between support services and academic units. An advantage of this position is that competition within the institution is minimized.

Funding for the office may come from a variety of sources. NODA reports that on many college campuses, student government funds are used to finance much of the cost of orientation programs. Grant monies may serve as an initial source for beginning new programs or a one time orientation fee may provide another source of revenue. NODA contends that, *"the dollar cost of orientation may not be as important as the perception that potential participants have of the program."*

In summary, the literature supports the idea that societal changes have required that institutions reexamine their philosophy regarding orientation. Many theorists, practitioners, and professional organizations are in agreement with the League for Innovation (1987) which states, *"the current challenge is to assure student success."*

Further, a correlation exists between successful orientation programs and retention. There is, however, a consensus that no one method of implementing orientation programs can fulfill all the goals of orientation; nonetheless, planners must be not be limited to traditional methods, but must, in the words of Noel, *"be risk-takers, realistic about the consequences and willing to break the molds."*

Programs at Other Institutions

STRUCTURE

Given the recent emphasis between the relationship of orientation and student success, research indicates that there is a great diversity in programs at other colleges. There are, however, a number of commonalties within these programs.

First, most of the institutions have a centralized orientation office, with responsibility for the program clearly assigned. This office or department coordinates orientation functions involving both academic and administrative departments. The office may come under the aegis of Student Affairs at one institution, while another may assign it to Academic Affairs. That is, where it is located, is not as important as the idea that the program has a separate identity and ownership.

Second, most programs are expanded and sequential in nature, based upon developmental stages of learning. The programs take into account the hierarchy order in which students process information, acknowledging that a one day or one week program creates information overload. There is a danger that this overload may produce an initial negative reaction, which may set the tone for receptivity towards learning throughout an entire college career. With an expanded program, students receive information sequentially, as the need arises.

To continue, many colleges offer an expanded orientation course specifically designed to enhance student success. The diversity among these programs, however, greatly varies. Some are voluntary, while others are mandatory. Some are credit bearing, yet others are not. Faculty involvement may or may not be a requirement. Also, funding and staffing resources differ. Nonetheless, assisting students with the transition to college is the primary objective. Course topics often include study skills, time management, college resources, values clarification, career exploration and transfer options. One internationally recognized model which incorporates these elements is the *"Freshman Year Experience"* developed by John Gardner at the University of South Carolina.

The Gardner model attempts to humanize the college environment for entering students. Specifically, the course helps students not only survive the freshman year, but also creates a positive attitude toward the intrinsic rewards of higher education. Students are encouraged to develop to their fullest potential. The course teaches them how.

A credit bearing course, *"University 101"* is offered as an elective to all entering freshman. Gardner feels that assignment of credit is necessary to maintain the level of motivation and interest necessary for the course to achieve intended outcomes. Furthermore, academic credit gives the course validity with faculty, students, and administrators. Gardner contends that the question of academic credit should not be one of either/or, but one of how much.

The basic goals of the course never vary. First, the instructor begins to foster a sense of affiliation among the students. This may be done through writing and discussions focusing on the value of higher education or on individual goals. As the class begins to become a support group for its members, problems and resources are identified by the instructor and students. Groups are assigned to investigate these resources and through related reading and writing assignments, students begin to see their college experience in a holistic manner. Throughout the process, students are improving their study and writing skills, as well as their social and academic skills. Although the core elements never change, the program is adaptable to the needs of individual groups.

Other colleges have adopted Gardner's concept, adjusting it to meet the needs of each institution's student population. Although influencing student success is the primary goal, many report that a course is an effective tool in both recruitment and retention.

Retention and Academic Performance

Because of the diversity of colleges and the programs they offer, it is difficult to construct a precise retention formula. The following data, therefore, does not support any one program, yet merely discusses how an orientation course affects retention, overall academic performance, and FTEs at individual institutions.

- The State University of New York at Brockport, for example, reduced its attrition rate by ten percent after initiating a mandatory orientation program, according to Thomas Bonner, Dean for Division of General Education (1988).

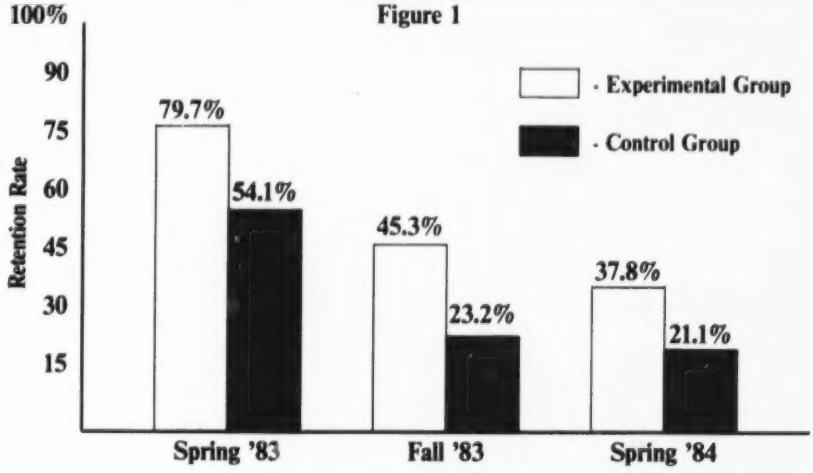
- Similarly, the *College Seminar Course* at Trenton State College has made a significant difference in freshman retention. Originating in 1977, the seminar became a graduation requirement for all full-time, first-time freshmen and carried academic credit. Between 1980 and 1985, students who passed the seminar had a 22.8 percent higher retention rate than those who did not take the course (FYE Newsletter, 1988).

- Sacramento City College students who enrolled in a *College Success* program were more successful than those who went through a three hour orientation or a last minute one hour information session (Stupka, 1986). Participants in the program completed 2.76 more semester units, earned a higher grade point average, and had a lower attrition rate — 8.62% to 18.27% when compared to students who had a three hour session; 8.62% to 21.29% when compared to those who participated in a one hour session.

- Also, a structured orientation program at Phillips Community College had a significant impact on retention, as Figure 1 illustrates. While other factors may influence retention figures, the data supports the value of an orientation course relative to student retention. Statistics also indicated that the course was a significant contributor

to student persistence throughout the remaining semesters of their college experience (Jones, 1984).

Figure 1



Retention Rates for Research Groups Over a Two Year Period (Fall 1982 Class)

SOURCE: Evaluating the Impact of Freshmen Orientation on Student Persistence and Academic Performance 1984. Phillips Community College.

- Bronx Community College is still another example of the impact which an orientation course has on retention, as well as academic performance. A 1982 study concluded that the mean GPA and re-enrollment rate were significantly higher for students participating in a ten week course, than for those who did not.

- As is evidenced in Table 1., Old Dominion University also recognizes the positive effects of an orientation course. It reduced the frequency of first semester students being placed on probation. In addition, the University not only increased FTEs with its *University Orientation 101* course, but also was able to accomplish it by using existing resources.

Table 1

Effects of University Orientation (101) on First Semester Probation Rates by High School GPA, S.A.T. Total, and Admissions Status. Academic Year 1987-88

	Probation %		Difference
High School GPA	**101**	**No 101**	**Percentage Points**
Upper 25%	13%	14.6%	1.6
Mid 50%	31.6%	34.9%	3.3
Lower 25%	43.5%	48.4%	4.9
S.A.T.			
Upper 25%	23.4%	25.3%	1.9
Mid 50%	26.3%	33.9%	7.6
Lower 25%	39.7%	42.2%	2.5

SOURCE: **Old Dominion University**

► Further, Miami-Dade Community College has also increased its retention rate by initiating an orientation course. Results a 1985 study indicated that:

> students who enrolled in SLS 1101, *College Survival,* were indeed more likely to survive college when "survival" was defined as continued enrollment one year later and a first-semester grade point average that exceeded 2.0. In general, 67% or 768 students who enrolled in SLS 1101 were still enrolled one year later compared to 46% or 395 of those who had not enrolled. At the end of the first semester, 68% of the SLS enrollees had grade point averages that exceeded 2.0 compared to 56% of those who had not enrolled.

Three-quarters of the students thought they would be better able to survive at Miami-Dade after participating in the course. In addition to student success, the study cited an ancillary benefit of the *College Survival* course to the institution.

> These results indicate that for the 1985 group studied, the SLS course helped to retain 75 students who otherwise would no longer be enrolled. If all first-time-in-college students had been enrolled in the course, an additional 427 students would have remained on North Campus one year later. With an average credit load of 9.0, in one semester, the 'retainees' would generate 17 FTEs or almost $42,000 if the college moved outside its assigned enrollment corridor. The 427 potential 'retainees' would generate 96 FTEs or close to $236,000.

► Finally, in one of the country's most highly regarded programs, participants in the *University 101* course at the University of South Carolina have significantly higher rates of retention and predicted academic achievement than non-participants. A longitudinal study of the program's success, indicates the following: first, in all instances from 1973 through 1987 the survival rates of participants, after one year, was higher than rates of non-participants; second, for the past twelve years, the predicted freshman grade point average, based upon weighted SAT scores and high school rank, was higher for non-participants in the course, yet the actual survival rate for those students was lower than those students enrolled in *University 101 (see Appendix A).*

Clearly, there is a connection between successful orientation programs, academic performance, and retention. In fact, Beal and Noel (1980) determined that a number of institutions identified orientation as *"the most effective retention activity when focused on a special target group."* Again, it must be emphasized that the philosophy inherent in successful orientation programs is not one of student retention, but one of student education.

Findings

Sweeping societal changes over the past decade have been reflected in the MCC student population. The term "traditional student" is quickly becoming outdated. Because of changing demographics resulting in a diversity of students, college orientation is taking on a new importance.

While there are numerous theories regarding the role of orientation, no one theory can be applied to the exclusion of all others. Successful programs, however, share the philosophy of the League for Innovation which states that *"student development professionals have the responsibility not only to provide the conditions and opportunities in which students might succeed, but to determine and prescribe practices that lead to success (1987)."*

As a result, orientation programs are becoming more aggressive, using innovative intervention methods, foregoing passive, dated approaches. Successful orientation programs are based on a philosophy of educational responsibility, rather than retention. Theorist Lee Noel contends that *"the question institutions should ask themselves is not how many students they should seek to retain, but how to best meet the educational responsibility they have assumed in admitting these students (1987)."*

► In adapting to the changing needs of students, colleges are providing meaningful services and programs which focus on student success. Although depth and range of programs may vary, institutional commitment is an integral part of any program. *"The secret of effective retention lies not in the type of program institutions construct for their students, but in the underlying commitment to the students that inspires their construction (Tinto, 1987)."*

Institutions recognize that the first six weeks of college is a crucial time for new students. Often, too little attention is paid to entering students' needs. Student problems are many: cultural shock, loss of identity, establishing relationships, clarification of values and choosing a career. Since the first few weeks and the months preceding can influence a student's attitude for an entire college career, programs must have a wide variety of interventions to help students adapt.

While no one program can fulfill all the goals of orientation, effective programs are based upon student development needs. Programs must be continuous in nature if orientation is to be a developmental process. Eighty-one percent of the faculty and staff interviewed felt the present program needs to be expanded. Primary research also indicates that a program should be separate, sequential, flexible and longitudinal in format, yet it must be carefully integrated with advisement and registration.

While MCC student needs are diverse, the program should have some common elements, and the following themes should be addressed: academic boredom; uncertainty about what to study; transition/adjustment problems; unrealistic expectations, academic

underpreparedness; incompatibility and irrelevance. Still, the program should be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of specific sub-groups such as returning women, adult learners, or minority students.

- Because integration into college by a student affects his/her subsequent commitment to the college, structured opportunities for interaction with faculty and staff must be provided. While faculty and staff felt that students would be reluctant to participate in orientation, the results of the student survey reveal the contrary. A high percentage said that faculty involvement is essential. Many requested more opportunities for socialization and suggested increased faculty involvement both inside and outside the classroom.

- Dan Shaeffer of the American College Testing Program suggests that an *"intrusive orientation program increases retention (1988)."*

Performance and retention data support the value of an orientation course relative to student persistence and grade point averages. Institutions that offer a course enhance student retention, academic performance, and the use of student support services. Many educators feel that institutions have an educational responsibility to give students the tools to be successful.

Students, faculty, and staff concur that a course of the college survival genre should be available for those wishing to participate. Studies show that both the institution and the students value a course which confers academic credit. Among those colleges which offer a class there is a consistency in course syllabi; study and writing skills, as well as social and academic skills are emphasized. Courses are usually taught by various members of the college community including deans, directors, faculty and staff.

In addition, those colleges which have initiated an orientation course report that it also serves as a successful recruitment tool.

- Because of the increased emphasis of the role of orientation on college campuses, many institutions have a centralized office, appropriately staffed, which coordinates all functions. Responsibility and resources, as well as authority and accountability, are clearly assigned. The functions of orientation, advisement, and registration are carefully integrated into one well designed system. Furthermore, front loading of staff—the process of relocating enthusiastic and knowledgeable employees to better serve first time students—is also an integral part of successful programs.

- Proper funding ensures longevity and continuity. Funding for the program is unique to each institution and is commensurate with the institution's commitment to the quality of the program. It generally comes from a variety of sources such as tuition dollars, separate orientation fees, student activity fees, and grant monies. A separate orientation fee is common at many colleges.

- Benefits of a structured orientation program are numerous. First, an effective program promotes a sense of affiliation for students. It fosters individual success while facilitating self-directedness, and diminishing anxiety levels. It also enhances academic performance and persistence.

  Secondly, the institution benefits from a comprehensive program. Successful programs increase retention, while concomitantly fulfilling educational responsibility. An integrated program allows for greater efficiency and assists in promoting a spirit of cooperation between staff, faculty, and administration.

- In conclusion, a reluctance toward change presently exists, which is not in the best interest of the college or the students its serves. Significant changes in orientation are impeded by this reluctance and must be addressed.

  Many faculty and staff voiced the concern that generating FTEs is the basis of the current MCC philosophy, and feel there is a reluctance on the part of the administration to commit resources to an orientation program. They felt that a program would require a college wide commitment and spoke of the need to establish a valued program with unqualified support from the administration.

  Currently, there is a lack of a common philosophy and clear direction regarding orientation. While some staff welcome potential changes, others are defensive of the present system. Findings indicate that systemic attitudinal obstacles need to be addressed if changes in orientation are to occur.

  Finally, the purpose of this report is not to look back, but to look forward. If Monroe Community College is to maintain its reputation as a college of quality and innovation in the upcoming decade, we must continually ask ourselves what business we are really in. The future belongs to those who plan for, understand, and are willing to adapt to change.

Recommendations

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

Strategic Planning:

Institutional commitment to an orientation program should be endorsed at the highest level and included in the 1988-90 strategic planning objectives.

Campaign:

An internal campaign should be designed to promote the importance of orientation by December 1, 1988.

Task Force:

A task force comprised of administration, faculty, staff and students should be established to provide assistance in the planning of a campus-wide Orientation Day.

Orientation Day:

Incorporated as part of the 1989-90 academic calendar, a campus-wide orientation event should be held the for entering students prior to the first day of classes.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

Goal:

The goal of orientation should be to aid students in their transition to the college environment, thereby enhancing their opportunities for success.

Objectives:

1. To assist students in understanding the mission of higher education and its relevancy to their success.
2. To cultivate within students an attitude of self direction and assessment.
3. To familiarize students with academic requirements, as well as procedures and program options.
4. To foster student development by increasing their awareness of available support services.
5. To encourage student persistence in achieving educational goals.
6. To create for students a sense of affiliation through socialization and interaction.

PROGRAM DESIGN

Orientation Sessions:

Orientation sessions by academic division should be a primary element in the process. These sessions should be conducted prior to advisement and registration. Special attention should be directed toward the Liberal Arts and Business divisions.

Opportunities should be specifically designed for socialization among students, faculty, staff and administration throughout the various stages of the Orientation cycle.

Orientation sessions should be designed for specific subgroups of students including: part-time, athletes, "2 Plus 2", minority, high-risk and adult learners.

A minimum of three parent/spouse orientation sessions should be offered on an annual basis.

Off-campus orientation sessions should be conducted at designated city high schools, beginning in April of 1989.

Orientation Course:

An orientation course should be available to all entering students and offered on a credit-bearing/tuition basis no later than September of 1989. Coordinating responsibility for the design and implementation of the course should be assigned to the Student Affairs Division.

A course syllabus should be designed to include: academic and career information, college resources, study and writing skills, test taking methods, time management techniques and personal adjustment issues.

Faculty, staff and administration should be carefully selected, invited to participate, and trained as course instructors.

STRUCTURE/STAFF

Centralization:

Orientation should be centralized under one office/position within the Student Affairs Division. Therefore, a divisional restructuring is an immediate prerequisite and should be operational by the beginning of January of 1989. Further, coordinating authority and responsibility for the Orientation program should be clearly assigned.

Staffing:

The professional staff member responsible for the program should report directly to the Vice President for Student Affairs.

Institutional priority should be given to hiring additional professional staff. In the absence of that, present staff responsibilities must be realigned, rather than assigning additional orientation duties to present staff.

Creative approaches need to be designed to attract additional peer counselors. A comprehensive recruitment campaign should be developed by December of 1988. In addition, peer counselor training should emphasize student developmental learning processes.

Faculty participation in orientation should be an institutional priority.

FUNDING

Present Funding:

Present institutional funding support should be maintained.

Activity Fee:

The Student Activity Budget for the Orientation program should be increased two-hundred percent for the 1988-89 academic year and proportionately thereafter.

Orientation Fee:

Beginning in September of 1989, a separate orientation fee should be assessed to all first-time day students. This fee should be used to underwrite staff and other administrative costs incurred through program expansion.

OTHER

Distribution of College Resource Materials:

Orientation material should be distributed sequentially from the time of student acceptance throughout the orientation cycle.

The College Catalog/Student Handbook should be published in advance of orientation and be available to students prior to advisement/registration.

Options for implementation of many of these recommendation, as well as a suggested timetable have been submitted under separate cover to the Vice President for Student Affairs for review and response.

APPENDIX A

Comparison of Freshman Survival Rates and Predicated Grade Point Averages for University 101 Participants vs. Non-Participants; University of South Carolina, 1973-1986

	University 101		Non-Participants	
For Students Entering:	**Predicted GPA**	**Survival Rate**	**Predicted GPA**	**Survival Rate**
Fall 1973 (N=2459)	1.97 **		1.88	
After One Year (Fall 1974)		81.5 **		74.4
Fall 1974 (N=2713)	1.95		1.93	
After One Year (Fall 1975)		77.2		73.9
Fall 1975 (N=2818)	1.95		2.09 **	
After One Year (Fall 1976)		77.9		76.0
Fall 1976 (N=2887)	1.80		1.87 **	
After One Year (Fall 1977)		79.7 **		73.2
Fall 1977 (N=3048)	1.84		1.87	
After One Year (Fall 1978)		80.8 *		76.9
Fall 1978 (N=3315)	1.80		1.82	
After One Year (Fall 1979)		82.5 **		76.7
Fall 1979 (N=3536)	1.80		1.86	
After One Year (Fall 1980)		80.9 **		73.8
Fall 1980 (N=3482)	2.00		2.02	
After One Year (Fall 1981)		79.3 **		74.8
Fall 1981 (N=2847)	2.12		2.18	
After One Year (Fall 1982)		83.8 **		76.6
Fall 1982 (N=2867)	2.09		2.1	
After One Year (Fall 1983)		84.5 **		78.1
Fall 1983 (N=2501)	2.02		2.19 **	
After One Year (Fall 1984)		83.9 *		80.0
Fall 1984 (N=2371)	2.17		2.28 **	
After One Year (Fall 1985)		83.4 **		79.7
Fall 1985 (N=2946)	2.16		2.32 **	
After One Year (Fall 1986)		80.6		79.7
Fall 1986 (N=2590)	2.22		2.32 **	
After One Year (Fall 1987)		80.9		79.2

Predicted freshman grade point average based on weighted S.A.T. scores and high school rank.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

SOURCE: Factbook: University 101, The Freshman Seminar

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